



James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, eds. *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2016. x., 336p. 36 ill. ISBN 9780812248258. USD 69.95 (hardcover).

In this exemplary collection of essays, James Daybell and Andrew Gordon provide an astute, comprehensive, and intellectually stimulating view on the early modern culture of correspondence. As the authors clarify in the introduction, “a fundamental aim of the book is the reconstruction of the material conditions and practices of the early modern letter” (8), which includes close readings of its content, careful analyses of its materiality, attention to its carrier networks, consideration of the relationships between writers and recipients, and explorations of the early modern letter’s classification and archival practices. Building on important studies in the field of Renaissance letters, such as Gary Schneider’s *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* and Susan Fitzmaurice’s *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, this collection also considers



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the significant expansion in resources allowed by digitization programs undertaken by major research libraries, explores new case studies, and approaches the letter as a complex sociotext of the early modern period.

The book is divided in four sections of equal strength. Part I, 'Material Practices,' contains two outstanding articles by Jonathan Gibson, who eruditely explores the varieties of italic script in early modern English letters (and provides a wealth of suggestive visuals to complement his argument), and Mark Brayshay, who analyzes the means by which official and private letters were carried between 1500 and 1640, in an argument aptly supported by maps indicating the post stages in England that required payment between 1553-1557, and the "hub postmasters" in England and Wales toward the end of the seventeenth century. Part II, 'Technologies and Designs,' starts with a very engaging article by Nadine Akkerman on the "enigmatic cultures of cryptology" during the early modern period. The author takes as her case study the correspondence networks of Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia, a proficient cryptologist, to argue that, "in addition to concealing information, cryptography might have had a larger and more subtle social function" (83): that of establishing exclusive writing coterie. Andrew Gordon's essay compellingly discusses how the cultures of correspondence had been infiltrated by a culture of counterfeiting in modern England, and takes a close look at the case of John Daniell, who admitted to have procured some of Earl of Essex's letters to be copied, counterfeited, and forged. Andrew Zurcher looks at the use of ciphers in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and argues for a reading of these works as necessarily informed by anxieties about epistolary security. Part III, 'Genres and Rhetorics,' starts with Lynne Magnusson's essay on the role of letter writing within the "educational revolution" that occurred between 1560 and 1640, and looks at a merchant's family letters and their use of the Ciceronian epistolary model. Christopher Burlinson explores the epistolary career of John Stubbs's left hand (after his right one was publicly cut off in November 1579, following his inflammatory writings against Queen Elizabeth's proposed marriage with the Duke of Anjou) as a material sign of his newly acquired, "loyal-in-opposition," identity (as suggested by his Scaeva signature alluding to Livy's hero). Michelle O'Callaghan writes a very compelling piece on the codes of politeness instituted by the letter-writing and courtesy manuals of the time, delivering a nuanced, gender-sensitive analysis of several epistolary exchanges (between men, women, and both). The author argues for a close connection between the vituperative letter and verse libel during the Renaissance



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period, and insightfully gestures toward the (lack of) limits of textualized violence against women.

Finally, Part IV, 'The Afterlives of Letters,' focuses on the archival practices that allowed the preservation of early modern correspondence. Arnold Hunt's article discusses archival preservation and destruction of letters in the late Elizabethan period as politically inflected by the complicated public/private status of such messages and the inherent dangers of newswriting. In the next article, James Daybell reads letter writing within a gendered framework, using Derrida's term "matriarchive" as a useful conceptual tool that draws attention to women's role in archiving correspondence and preserving papers within their households. Often turned into family books of remembrances, family histories and memoirs, or pedigrees and miscellanies, such letters circulated, were annotated, and were archived in ways that "destabilize our understanding of early modern letters as fixed texts, especially in their later reincarnations" (233). Last but not least, Alan Stewart's essay shifts focus from the content and/or materiality of letters to the places they occupy over time, from the moment of their creation to their eventual preservation in digital, museum, or private repositories. Bringing again to the fore the private/public division, the author takes a perceptive look at the history of the State Paper Office by delving into the activities of Thomas Wilson, the keeper of the records at Whitehall between 1606 and his sudden death in 1629. His analysis demonstrates how "familiar letters may tell us a good deal more about the places occupied by state papers than the official papers" (252) themselves.

This volume does, indeed, deliver on its promise: it provides the readers with varied, suggestive, and genuinely interesting cases that are made available by recently digitized repositories, and sheds new light on the multifarious ramifications of letter writing during the early modern period. The collection is also rich in visuals that aptly support the authors' arguments and is clearly organized conceptually. As such, it is a necessary work for the specialist and also, given the focus of some of the articles on representative figures of the time, for a broader audience as well.

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